

Nebraska Early Childhood Policy Study Report Summary

At the request of the Nebraska State Board of Education, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) conducted an Early Childhood Policy Study addressing kindergarten and prekindergarten issues. The study began in June 2004 with the initial meeting of a leadership team comprised of stakeholders from throughout the state. The policy study was an opportunity to listen to the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of Nebraskans to help determine the direction of early childhood policy in the state.



Facts about Early Childhood

Population growth rates have resulted in more children in America than at any other time. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that there will be 25.6 million children in America who are under age 6 by the year 2010.



Child poverty has increased. In Nebraska, 14% of children under age 5 live in poverty.



Responsive caregiving builds a child's brain. Early care is linked to a child's later ability to learn and to maintain positive relationships with others.



Early Childhood programs have consistently shown academic and social benefits for children. Programs are especially beneficial for children who are "at risk" for school failure.



Investments in high quality early education and care programs are economically sound. Benefits have been demonstrated to be as high as \$17.07 for every \$1 invested.

Stakeholder discussions were held with the Early Childhood Policy Study Leadership Team, focus groups and discussion forums including groups with school administrators, early childhood/kindergarten teachers, the Early Childhood Interagency Coordinating Council, professional organizations NDE staff, and others.

Five themes emerged as a catalyst for continued discussion:

Access to Services:

- Many parts of Nebraska are underserved by early childhood programs.
- Programs that are available often have eligibility criteria that limit access by the general community.
- Programs that are funded through parent fees are unaffordable to many Nebraskans.

Quality/Best Practices:

- Pressure to increase student achievement has the potential to replace accepted best practices with practices that do not fit with young children's developmental needs.
- The quality of early childhood programs is uneven throughout the state.
- Well qualified staff are difficult to hire and retain throughout the state.

Early Childhood Partnerships:

- School districts staff, Head Start grantees, and representatives of community programs have identified time, financial resources, and "turf" issues as obstacles to overcome in creating partnerships.

Facts about Early Childhood, cont.

The Midwest Child Care Research Consortium reported that 34% of child care in Nebraska has been observed to be good quality, 48% as minimal quality, and 18% as poor quality..



In Nebraska, 67% of kindergarteners attend a full-day kindergarten program.



Themes—Early Childhood Partnerships, continued:

- Policies from state agencies should encourage partnerships.

Community Support:

- Early childhood education and care is undervalued by the general public.
- Parents often do not have information necessary to determine the level of quality in early childhood programs.
- Coordinated strategic efforts must be undertaken to educate Nebraskans about the importance of the early years.

Financing:

- Quality costs money.
- High quality early childhood programs and services ultimately save tax dollars.

Priorities and Recommendations

Desired Outcome: Provide high quality, inclusive early childhood services for all Nebraska children from birth through age eight.

From a review of research and from the input gathered throughout the state, the Leadership Team determined five priorities and recommendations for each:

■ **Priority: Access to Programs and Services**

- 1) Implement statewide full day/every day kindergarten.
- 2) Expand Nebraska early childhood grant funded program to increase availability of collaborative community based prekindergarten for all 3 and 4 year olds.
- 3) Establish expectations for supporting best practices, which encompass class size and active learning environments in kindergarten through third grade.
- 4) Ensure access to high quality early childhood education and care services for all children birth to three whose families would choose to access such services.
- 5) Establish a system for exchanging information with families about the development and learning of young children from birth to age eight.

■ **Priority: Quality/Best Practices**

- 1) Strengthen state and local infrastructure to address all aspects of the early childhood system including: governance, accountability, and regulations/standards; staff preparation, professional development, and compensation; and family information and support.
- 2) Require highly qualified staff with current knowledge to implement early childhood programs for children from infancy through third grade.
- 3) Ensure best practices are implemented in all settings across prekindergarten, kindergarten and primary level programs in areas including, but not limited to, teaching, standards, curriculum, assessment, inclusion, diversity, transitions, adult/child ratios.

■ **Priority: Partnerships**

- 1) Coordinate and share resources to facilitate collaboration and partnership at the state and local level to achieve high quality early childhood services that meet the unique needs of young children who are typically developing and who have disabilities.
- 2) Encourage regional partnerships to establish Early Childhood Specialist positions within each regional area to provide technical assistance to local early childhood programs.

■ **Priority: Financing**

- 1) Develop an early childhood endowment fund to support the implementation of quality programming throughout Nebraska.
- 2) Identify public funding streams and maximize their use to provide quality services to all children including children birth through age eight.

■ **Priority: Community Support**

- 1) Support and join the efforts of other state agencies and groups to create a common knowledge base throughout Nebraska of the importance of the early years and related issues regarding early education and care.
- 2) Create a statewide network to collect and disseminate information regarding early education and care issues.

“Policy makers must identify the educational investments that yield the highest public returns. Here the literature is clear: Dollars invested in ECD [early childhood development] yield extra-ordinary public returns.” (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003, p. 7)

The Policy Partner Forum Issues

In the spring of 2005, State Board of Education Policy Partner Forums were held in Gering, Grand Island, Lincoln, McCook, Norfolk, and Omaha. Participants represented parents, educators of children from birth through school age, higher education, professionals from community service agencies, local school boards and interested community members. The recommendations formed the basis for discussion as they related to five service areas for young children and the challenges inherent in each.

SERVICE AREAS for YOUNG CHILDREN:	CHALLENGES:			
	Program implementation	Public Awareness	Curriculum	Access
Full-Day Kindergarten	✓	✓	✓	
Prekindergarten	✓	✓	✓	✓
Best Practices K-Grade 3	✓	✓	✓	
Children Ages Birth–3	✓	✓		✓
Family Involvement	✓	✓		

Program implementation:

- Teachers with early childhood endorsements and paraprofessionals/aides with early childhood coursework are not uniformly available throughout the state.
- Administrators/supervisors do not always have any background in early childhood development.
- Many non-public programs do not have the resources to pay well-qualified staff a living wage.

- Programs (school districts and community programs alike) have difficulty meeting the needs of diverse groups of children when human and financial resources result in large classes and inadequate support.

Public Awareness:

- Policy makers, funders, and members of the public lack knowledge of the strong link between a child's early experiences and later academic and life success.
- Community members are not aware of the needs of young children and their families.
- Professionals who work with young children are undervalued by society.
- Parents underestimate their own importance in the development and education of their young children.

Curriculum:

- Society appears to emphasize academic achievement at the expense of other important life skills.
- Community members and educators noted that curriculum formerly reserved for older children has been "pushed down" to younger and younger children.
- Societal pressures foster the expectation that all children learn at the same pace and meet the same goal at the end of the year regardless of the child's prior knowledge and experience, ability home language and learning style.

Access:

- There are no early childhood education and care programs in some communities.
- Programs that are accredited have lengthy waiting lists.
- Children "fall through the cracks" when there are no public early childhood programs available to them.
- Many parents cannot afford to pay for early childhood education and care services.

Early care and nurture have a decisive, long-lasting impact on how people develop, their ability to learn, and their capacity to regulate their own emotions." (Shore, 1997, p.27)

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